

POST INSIGHT, OPINION & VIEWS

MEMO TO McNAMARA

FORMER Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara now says America was "wrong, terribly wrong" about the Vietnam War. When asked, President Clinton said McNamara is right about being wrong, which makes him (Clinton) right, not wrong, about what he (Clinton) did during Vietnam. I say this is an odd couple who were both wrong twice, then and now.

McNamara's new book, "In Retrospect," is a maxi culpa. One reason we acted wrongly, terribly wrongly, in Vietnam was "... because of our increasing fear — and hindsight makes it clear it was an exaggerated fear — of what would happen if we did not."

McNamara says there just weren't enough meetings to ask the right questions, such as, "... Was it true that the fall of South Vietnam would trigger the fall of all Southeast Asia? Would that constitute a grave threat to the West's security? ... It seems beyond understanding, incredible, that we did not force ourselves to confront such issues head-on."

What is beyond understanding, incredible, is that McNamara would think those were answerable questions, then or now. And what gives him such a clear hindsight that our fear was exaggerated?

Recall: What were we afraid of? The Cold War. The Soviet Union. Communist China. Communism. Nuclear weapons. Totalitarianism. Expansionism. Those issues had been earlier confronted head-on by the United States, and a decision had been made: Contain the red tide and the evil empire.

McNamara is right: We didn't know what would happen if the tide or the empire was not contained in Vietnam, or anywhere else. But

In the end, the good guys won, so why the wailing?

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we did know that communists talked about global domination, had invaded Eastern Europe, had lots of nukes pointed at us, were subverting governments and conducting "wars of national liberation."

It seemed best not to find out what would happen if we didn't respond. So we responded. What would have happened had we responded, but not in Vietnam? No one knows, including McNamara. Could we have had better strategy in Vietnam? Yes, surely in hindsight.

McNamara seemed certain then that we were right, and seems certain now that we were wrong. Anyone so certain doesn't understand. One thing is understandable. The good guys won the Cold War and the bad people with the big missiles went beddy-bye. Some think that happened because we responded, even at the margin.

What about Clinton? He is also certain. Asked by Wolf Blitzer of CNN whether he felt "vindicated" by McNamara's book, Clinton answered: "Yes I do. I know that sounds self-serving, but I do." Wrong. It is not self-serving. It is Republican-serving. It is sad.

Later, a White House spokesman said Clinton thought McNamara's argument "... certainly vindicates the views of millions of Americans, including President Clinton, that the Vietnam War was a sorry episode in American history and that those who opposed the war had good grounds for doing so."

During that sorry episode young Bill Clinton was — ahem — at least a canny draft avoider. He worked for the late Sen. William Fulbright, the dovish segregationist who said America was guilty of an "arrogance of power." Now Clinton has become president and feels our pain.

Should a pain-feeling president, the commander in chief, say out loud that the anti-war movement has been vindicated? It is both unkind and impolitic. Does Clinton mean that the 9 million Americans who served in the military during Vietnam, when Clinton was otherwise busy, have been unvindicated? Were they on a fool's mission? What about the families of the 58,000 Americans who were killed in Vietnam? Unvindicated?

That's a lot of people, with pain, who listened to McNamara then. Many of them cannot be happy with what Clinton has implied. Many of them share a political habit: They vote in presidential elections.

What about the military today? Does their commander believe in selective conscientious objection? May they believe similarly? ("Colonel, I'll go to Haiti, but not Somalia...")

It is a sorry episode. It makes you wonder who is more terribly wrong. Is it McNamara, who is neither president nor running for office, or Clinton, who is both?

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WAR TALK: Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and Gen. William Westmoreland, commander of U.S. forces in Vietnam, after a strategy meeting at the White House in 1967.